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ABSTRACT

A strategy for teaching the liberal arts in colleges should include the study of American culture through the mass media as a major component. In an age of exploitative media messages and low audiovisual literacy on the part of the mass of media consumers, liberal education must be altered to include training in sophisticated media consumption. Such training can be accomplished through classroom structural analysis of the interrelationships between the culture and the view of that culture as projected by the media. A starting point can be the structural polarity of "abundance/scarcity," since the culture and the media reflect both the high standard of American living and the inflated desires of the citizens. Such media study can lead students to examine their own assumptions, values, and socio-political views so that they can more intelligently consume media messages. (CH)

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MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new method of media studies designed to be a major component of liberal education. The need for the proposed change in methodology is a function of the recent change of the academy into universal higher education rather than mass or elite student populations. The proposed method is adopted from cultural anthropology. The adaptation consists of using contemporary media productions as cultural documents and training the student to examine closely his own assumptions, beliefs, values, and socio-political environment. Two specific techniques are briefly outlined. One is a technique of presenting opposing cultural systems. The other is a structural approach to analysis of themes within mass media. The center or starting point of this structural analysis would be "abundance - scarcity."

As the American academy enters into an age of universal higher education, the role of media studies will be forced to change. We can no longer be so concerned with shaping young men and women to produce messages, but rather people to consume messages. The general field of rhetoric and communication for the past two thousand years has been concerned with training a sophisticated elite to use rhetorical skills for their own ends. In the not so distant past this may have been good or at least functional. In a mass democracy, with a highly literate body politic, this type of training becomes anachronistic, if not immoral. This paper argues that media studies should concentrate upon the receivers and not upon the techniques of creating more effective sophists. Specifically, a defensive receiver should understand, quite profoundly, what appeals are being used, what appeals work on the collective systems of predispositions, and what social milieu the message appears within. In short, the receiver needs a system of defenses against the skilled elite.

In the context of this argument one is reminded of the ancient Greek's concept of paideia; that portion of a culture which instructs the citizen about his duties. This element of the culture is imbedded throughout the environment, and only a small portion of it occurs in formal schooling. Since the 1950's, a great portion of our body politic has increasingly used media as a major portion of paideia. Further, if a liberal or general education can be considered as American cultural studies, media study should occupy a central position in that curriculum because media overwhelms the American paideia.

Let me try to illustrate the movement of college curriculums through the influence of media by this story. In the late 1920's Alexander Meiklejohn introduced a non-elective curriculum at the University of Wisconsin entitled "Studies in Letters and Science" or the "L and S" curriculum. This course of study was devised to help the students discover their personhood within the body politic of American culture. When I was an undergraduate at Wisconsin in the 1950's, the L and S curriculum was called by us students in the normal elective track as the "Loafing and Smoking" courses. I will assert that my experience with universal higher education in the late 1960's has brought me to the conclusion that Meiklejohn's curriculum should be renamed "Light and Sound." Today's college students have spent more time in front of a television set by the time they enter the academy than any other single activity with the exceptions of sleeping and being contained in primary and secondary classrooms. The portion of paideia called media is overwhelming in it's importance of the transmission of socio-political culture.

As mass media professionals, we are very aware of the current findings, inadequate as they are, regarding attitudes, attitude formation, and attitude change. We should, and I think many of us are, be aware of the concepts of American culture the American college student has seemingly formed in his informal studies. The Children's Television Workshop is very aware of inducing significant socio-political attitudes in the very young child. But all teenagers have seen much more than Sesame Street. Many of their social attitudes have been formed by the tube. Although McLuhan's views of television may be criticized, I believe that his assertions that the electronic media have profound, almost unknown influence on us, is essentially correct.

If you accept my admittedly sketchy analysis to this point, in what position is the teacher of media within a curriculum of liberal education? What posture should he try to adopt to use the existing paideia for human ends? I would contend that his closest methodological counterpart is the cultural anthropologist. As any anthropologist attempts to understand a culture, a certain superior position of an omniscient observer develops. Only a system of investigation will allow the observer to maintain a critical, analytical stance and not be overcome by arrogance and/or confusion. Traditionally, the cultural anthropologist is making an attempt to discover how certain groups of people think or what is the nature of a particular mass consciousness. This goal is remarkably similar to that of liberal education.

Here I would like to refer to Arthur Koestler's concept of jumps in mass consciousness. In Darkness at Noon, Rubashov is awaiting in his cell for his execution. He has been charged with being a counter-revolutionary. Rubashov wonders where the socialist-democratic revolution he helped lead as a young man went wrong and was transformed into a totalitarian state. He focuses upon the idea of mass consciousness and that this collectivity of attitudes, values, and beliefs by its very nature will always be behind the reality of the environment. When the gap becomes sufficiently large, the mass consciousness leaps in an attempt to bring the social order into correspondence with the changes in reality. These leaps are called revolutions if they occur with sufficient visibility. However, for the teacher who is concerned with social realities and mass consciousness, the focus should be upon the gaps between conventional wisdom and the realities. I contend media is a very fruitful way to discover and analyze these discontinuities.

In order to do this difficult task of recognition a certain cultural distance is necessary to gain useful insight. This is why many historians argue that we should read history. Let me illustrate how students seem to need some distance upon a concept before they recognize their own value condition. A few years ago I was a teacher in a program that attempted to emulate Meiklejohn's original L and S curriculum. We had a two week unit on the topic of "War and Peace." Our major readings were Thucydides and the late Bernard Fall's Vietnam Reader. I was startled to discover the freshman students got a larger, more profound insight from Thucydides than the contemporary work into the effect of the Vietnam conflict upon America. The reason was, of course, distance; an intellectual or even aesthetic distance that was necessary for understanding the cultural effects of a prolonged foreign war.

Within the classroom environment, one would have some difficulty producing distance upon the culture the students are imbedded within. There maybe many methods, but I would suggest two that seem to work.

The first is a rather common rhetorical figure; comparison and contrast or the presenting of opposites.. However, before the technique works one must be sure that the two items are truly opposite. The American intellectual system does not readily recognize systems in opposition. I might say that the Soviet system recognizes systems only in this fashion. Our culture has some seemingly obscure on first glance yet obvious tensions in our socio-political environment. These tensions produce many types of accomodations including conflict and social movement. In a rather strange way, popular media generally hides these tensions much like ancient Western mythology

hid many fundamental human problems from the culture at large. To use an anthropological figure of the eminent Claude Levi-Strauss, mythology "cooks" the "raw" of reality. These "cooked" conceptualizations are the shared symbolic "glue" or shared modes of mass consciousness which holds our culture, and increasingly our world, together and apart.

The undergraduate student may grasp the system tensions if selected media materials are presented in juxtaposition or even simultaneously. Some examples of these intellectual systems in conflict would be to contrast the PBS documentary of police work in St. Louis with Adam 12, Dragnet, or Columbo. Another example would be the National Film Board's near cinema-verite Things I Cannot Change and The Brady Bunch, both presentations of families. A more mundane example would be The Galloping Gourmet (who probably hates food) and the CBS documentary Hunger in America. The violence of the Roller Derby may be compared with the actual violence of city crime or guerilla warfare in The Battle of Algiers. An introductory course of media study could present these contrasts and focus upon the dialectical tension each pair reflects.

At a deeper level we can discover a second method for presenting media as cultural studies. The method is to adopt a current intellectual fad of structuralism. Overly simplified, this approach assumes that there is a common "deep structure" or wholeness of intellectual customs and beliefs which are common throughout a culture. A hundred years ago the majority of Americans knew and accepted the common beliefs of Christianity, shared through the Bible. Today, All in the Family and Saturday Night at the Movies are a major part of our common cultural symbolism. Structuralism assumes that the various

symbols, stories, customs and attitudes have a community or linkage. I believe that media is a rich source of cultural documents to tap the "deep structure" of contemporary America.

As one attempts to conceptualize what such a structure of symbolism might be, one would first need to look for the center of such a structure; a starting point from where all cultural sub-structures radiate. Furthermore, such a center would involve the double-think of opposing belief systems. I contend that for contemporary America the core is "abundance-scarcity." In much of our daily conversation we, with one breath, speak of our family unit's rather high standard of living and complain in the next breath about inflation, taxes, and investment difficulties. A truly objective observer would wonder if any of us consider ourselves rich or poor. America is an abundant land, yet the vulgar behavior of Let's Make A Deal or The Sale of the Century seems to underscore our view that the scarcity of life is overpowering. I would suggest that you consider Gilligan's Island, The Beverly Hillbillies, The Flintstones as truly magnificent double expressions of this myth. They are as expressive as Johnathan Swift's view of his England in Gulliver's Travels.

From this center some rather amusing, pathetic, and critical sub-structures emerge. The work ethic is paired with a free time ethic. I would suggest that the only people who work in media presentations are doctors, policemen, soldiers and an occasional lawyer who never charges fees. Of course, Mr. Brady is an architect, but have you ever seen him sit at a drawing board. How much news copy does Mary Tyler Moore edit each week?

Although space does not allow a full development of this concept here, I believe that almost all, if not every, commonly held belief and value in American culture can be clearly understood through structural analysis of the themes of media. The necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, steps are:

- 1) The treatment of media as cultural documents or artifacts.
- 2) The recognition that all themes contain a mythological or partially true component and a social reality which are probably in conflict.
- 3) That each of the components link together in such a manner as to form an ever expanding nebulae of mass consciousness.

If media studies could adopt a cultural anthropological posture, many of our youth who express disenfranchisement from their culture might be able to understand, if not articulate, the mass consciousness so many are trying to flee. For many this understanding would lead them to the conclusion that escape is difficult, if not impossible. The smallest amount of learning might lead them to consider their own cultural doublethink. To conclude with an illustration of one kind of learning that might emerge, I was teaching a course entitled, "Myth, Media, and Middle America." During one of the early sessions, a very hip, female student wanted a rather precise definition of the term "middle America." My response was directed to how little it had to do with geography, but more to the intellectual styles of the majority. She tried to ask another question, in an attempted hostile voice, "Are you trying to tell me, Sir, that I am a Middle American?" The class tittered, nervously, as they heard one of their own drop back in, at least for a moment.